

COALITIONS AND ALLIANCES

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New Coalitions and Alliances

Introduction

The health status of community residents is not the sole responsibility of the public health agency or health service providers. While public health agencies may bear responsibility for leading community health improvement efforts, their success hinges on their ability to establish and maintain effective partnerships within the community. The public health agency needs to identify and work with all entities that influence community health—from other government agencies to businesses to not-for-profit organizations to the general citizenry.Initiatives should begin with a commitment to collaboration among diverse constituencies so that everyone feels a sense of ownership. (*The Healthy People 2010 Toolkit*)

The purpose of this section is: 1) to discuss the concept of community organizing, coalition-building, collaboration, partnership development, and related strategies as integral to public health practice; 2) to relate this concept to national and state initiatives; 3) to discuss how to apply the concepts and integrate the strategies with day to day public health practice; and 4) to highlight applicable tools and resources.

Defining Key Concepts and a Public Health Framework

Social Participation and Collective Action

Public Health is most successful when there is ownership by communities, and when it is incorporated into social practices. The Essential Public Health Services provide a framework that reflects this principle of social participation in health.

- Essential Service # 3: *Inform, educate and empower people about health issues* - calls upon public health agencies to direct institutional action toward educating and empowering people to participate in public health.
- Essential Service # 4: *Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems* - places an emphasis on collective action and the underlying principle that people should have a say in decisions that affect them. Public health agencies are called upon to create mechanisms for participation that link public health agencies to the community. (*Framework For Action To Improve Public Health Practice, Virtual Campus For Public Health*)
- Essential Service #5: *Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts* - suggests that “technical expert knowledge is not adequate for creating healthy communities and strong public health systems. Technical knowledge does not address the essential questions of what values and vision to pursue and what issues are important for community health. For that, the wisdom that can only be generated through community dialogue is needed.” (*Mobilizing Action for Planning and Participation*)

Practice Strategies and Methods for Action

Community organizing, community mobilization, community engagement, coalition building, developing partnerships, collaboration, etc. are methods cited throughout public health literature as critical to public health practice. The fundamental principle underlying these methods is creating public benefit (improved public health) through social participation and collective action.

Definitions and Descriptions

There are multiple methods for facilitating social participation and collective action, and multiple definitions and descriptions for each. A few of these are listed below.

- Collaboration has been defined as “A relationship of working together cooperatively toward a common goal”. Such relationships may include a range of levels of participation by organizations and members of the community. The degree of partnership between community residents and organizations, the frequency of regular communication, equity of decision-making, access to information, and the skills and resources of residents determine these levels. (*Mobilizing Action for Planning and Participation, or MAPP*)
- Community collaboration is a dynamic, ongoing process of working together, whereby the community is engaged as a partner in public health action.” (*MAPP*)
- Community partnerships describe a continuum of relationships that foster the sharing of resources, responsibility and accountability in undertaking community health improvement. Public health agencies may convene or facilitate the collaborative process. The multiple levels of relationships among public, private, or nonprofit institutions have been described as
 - Networking: exchanging information for mutual benefit;
 - Coordination: exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose;
 - Collaboration: exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.
 - Multi-sector collaboration: a voluntary strategic alliance of public, private, and nonprofit organizations to enhance each other’s capacity to achieve a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, resources, and rewards.
 - Multi-sector partnerships such as community health improvement committees (community committees) exist in some communities as formally constituted bodies (e.g. a community health planning council) while in other communities they are less formal groups. (*National Public Health Performance Standards Program*)
- Coalition: a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. Coalitions may be loose associations in which members work for a short time to achieve a specific goal, and then disband. They may also become organizations in themselves, with governing bodies, particular community responsibilities, funding, and permanence. They may draw from a community, a region, a state, or even the nation as a whole (*The Community Toolbox*)
- Coalition building promotes and develops alliances among organizations or constituencies for a common purpose. It builds linkages, solves problems, and/or enhances local leadership to address health concerns. (*Minnesota PHN Interventions*)

Relating the Framework to National and State Initiatives

At both the state and national levels, these methods (and the underlying principles) are incorporated into public health standards.

National Public Health Performance Standards

The National Public Health Performance Standards are designed around the Essential Public Health Services. The Standards describe some of the key activities in public health practice. Specific actions identified for Essential Service # 4, (Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems) include:

- Identifying potential stakeholders who contribute to or benefit from public health, and increase their awareness of the value of public health
- Building coalitions to draw upon the full range of potential human and material resources to improve community health
- Convening and facilitating partnerships among groups and associations (including those not typically considered to be health-related) in undertaking defined health improvement projects, including preventive, screening, rehabilitation, and support programs.

- ✓ Information about the National Public Health Performance Standards Program can be accessed online at <http://www.phppo.cdc.gov/nphpsp/index.asp>

Standards for Public Health in Washington State

The Standards for Public Health in Washington State provide standards and measures of performance for governmental public health agencies in key aspects of public health. The Standards set an expectation that state and local public health agencies will:

- 1) Involve community members and stakeholders in reviewing data, identifying priorities, and developing plans to address public health issues.
- 2) Involve representatives from the community in health policy decisions.
- 3) Collaborate and coordinate with community partners to address public health issues.

These measures call for community participation across the core public health functions of 1) assessment, 2) policy development, and 3) assurance.

- ✓ *The Standards for Public Health in Washington State* can be accessed online at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/standards/default.htm>.

Applying and Integrating with Practice

How do local public health officials incorporate these principle and strategies into their day-to-day practice?

Collaborative Leadership

The Turning Point National Excellence Collaborative has focused on the collaborative process from the perspective of the skills and capacities needed by public health leaders to effectively carry out public health work.

The Collaborative has identified six elements as keys to the collaborative process:

- 1) Assessing the Environment for Collaboration: Understanding the context for change before you act.
- 2) Creating Clarity – Visioning & Mobilizing: Defining shared values and engaging people in positive action.
- 3) Building Trust & Creating Safety: Creating safe places for developing shared purpose and action.
- 4) Sharing Power and Influence: Developing the synergy of people, organizations, and communities to accomplish goals.
- 5) Developing People – Mentoring and Coaching: Committing to bringing out the best in others and realizing people are your key asset.
- 6) Self-Reflection – Personal CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement): Being aware of and understanding your values, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to your own leadership style and its impact on others.

Each of these elements is key to the collaborative process. They are not mutually exclusive but support each other and provide a comprehensive picture of the essential skills of a collaborative leader. (*Collaborative Leadership, Turning Point National Excellence Collaborative*)

- ✓ More information about Collaborative Leadership, and resources and tools for developing collaborative leadership skills can be accessed through the Turning Point website at <http://www.collaborativeleadership.org/>

Some Common-Sense Approaches

Where should new local public health officials start? Several practical approaches are identified in the Learning Resource Toolkit, and highlighted below:

- Identify potential stakeholders who contribute to or benefit from public health. Find out how the agency communicates with these stakeholders and, if needed, develop additional strategies to increase their awareness of the role and value of public health. Adapt and use existing tools, like the Public Health Communication Campaign developed through the Public Health Improvement Partnership. (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/PHIP/communications/tools/>)
- Obtain or create a list of existing coalitions, networks, boards and other community groups that are likely to be influential to local public health and its practice. The list should include the primary purpose of the group and identify local health jurisdiction representatives. Assure there is an internal strategy for coordinating communication with and about these groups.
- Establish and maintain collaborative relationships with key individuals and entities in the community.
- Explore and utilize existing models and tools that provide a focus on community participation and collective action, such as:
 - Mobilizing for Action Through Planning and Participation (MAPP)
 - Healthy People 2010 Toolkit
 - The Community Toolbox